



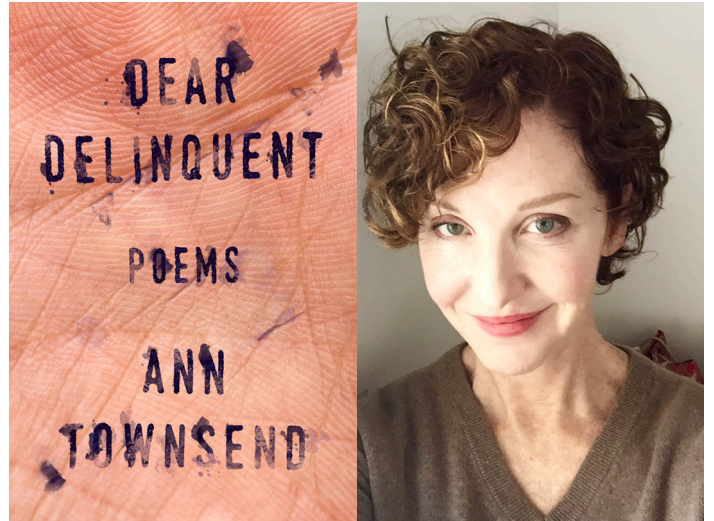
DEAR DELINQUENT

ANN TOWNSEND

READER'S GUIDE

TEN QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Consider the collection's title. "Dear Delinquent" is the salutation Edna St. Vincent Millay used to begin her erotic letters to Salomón de la Selva. Millay had a brief affair with de la Selva, a Nicaraguan poet and later ambassador to France, in 1917-18. How does the title resonate across the book and inform other poems in the collection?
2. The book begins with "How Excessively I Love," which is a loose translation of a troubadour love poem. In what way does this poem serve as an entry point for the poems that follow?
3. There are several references to medieval or troubadour poets in *Dear Delinquent*. I translate the women troubadour poets, who wrote in France during the 12th and 13th centuries. The troubadour poets invented courtly love, a concept of love between a knight and a married noblewoman, what Francis X Newman calls "a love at once illicit and morally elevating, passionate and disciplined, humiliating and exalting, human and transcendent." How are ideas about courtly love explored, undermined or re-examined in this collection? What kind of love is this? How do the erotic poems in *Dear Delinquent* take part in the larger tradition of love poetry?
4. Children move in and out of several poems in *Dear Delinquent*. What do they have in common with each other? What is their relationship to the narrator of these poems?
5. The voice of the lover interjects and interrupts frequently in these poems—what he says to the narrator often stops all conversation. I know what I think of him. What do you think of him?
6. A number of poets make cameos in this book—Edna St. Vincent Millay in "Millay's Hair," the troubadour poet Arnaut Daniel in "Lives of the Troubadour Poets," Catullus in "Jeopardy," and a whole bookcase's worth of modern and contemporary poets in "Lives of the British Poets," among others. How does this crowd of poets extend or speak to the other relationships in the book?



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7. There are subtle moments of political and environmental discourse in this collection: the *Cold War* in “A Unified Berlin,” the emerald ash borer in “The Late Ash Trees,” the abortion clinic in “The Spring of Life,” school shootings in “All Clear.” How does the personal interact with the political in this book?
8. I live on a small farm in Ohio, where I grow and hybridize daylilies. I work to sustain the acres on which I live by re-establishing native perennials in the woodlands that surround our house, and by creating habitats for the other creatures who call this place home: coyotes, skunks, foxes, and many other living things. In what ways does the natural world play a role in *Dear Delinquent*?
9. I wrote this book knowing that some reader might come to love poetry with the assumption that it is sentimental. And yet I believe there must be a way to convey the complexity, beauty, pain and pleasure of loving someone absolutely wrong. Sometimes we call poems sentimental when we want a pejorative code to describe something female. I wanted to find a way to recover the love poem as an arena for serious thinking, and for the exploration of female experience. How do these love poems do that?
10. *Dear Delinquent* is divided into five sections. How are the sections distinct from each other? If you were to read this collection as a sort of novel-in-verse, how does each section propel the collection forward toward its conclusion in “Post-Surgical Lepidoptera,” where “the single yellow butterfly, / sulphuric star, flies north, north against the wind?”

WRITING EXERCISES

The Vowel Scale

As a young person I was trained as a singer and sometimes now when I read poems, I think about the vowel scale I learned when I was twelve. What’s the vowel scale? Vowels differ in their perceived pitch or frequency. Knowing the vowel scale tells a singer where in her mouth particular sounds are voiced. A high frequency vowel, for instance, is vocalized in the front of your mouth. Linguists call these the bright vowels. The low frequency vowels, sung in the back of your mouth, are known as dark vowels. It’s the difference in pitch and location you both hear and nearly taste when I say the word “key” and the word “cool.” Whether you’re conscious of it or not, where the vowels live in your mouth profoundly affects how you experience the poem. Poetry is a kind of singing. And we don’t sing consonants. We sing vowels. That’s where the emotion resides. Singers know that consonants are simply how we shape our mouths when we close them around the vowels. The brightness and darkness we hear in words as we pronounce them colors tone; we read light, bright sounds more quickly, and deeper, lower frequency sounds as more serious in tone. Those lower pitches, combined with downward transitions in pitch from one syllable to another, read as more serious in connotation, while the upward transition reads as lighter. Think of Dylan Thomas, “rage, rage, against the dying of the light.”

Try it yourself: read your own poems out loud. Do your lines rise or fall? How hard are the vowels working in each of your lines?



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Pentametron

When my students want to extend and complicate the pace and rhythm of their lines, I ask them to experiment with blank verse, that is, unrhymed iambic pentameter lines. *Oh no!* they say. So we talk about how speech rhythms inform every sentence, how the iambic line is actually commonly found in our everyday conversations. For an example, I send them to Twitter, where they find an account called @pentametron, run by an algorithm that seeks out and retweets accidentally iambic pentameter tweets. For instance, the tweets “I got an alligator for a pet” and “lasagna is spaghetti-flavored cake” and “there’s no negotiating with a cat” are all iambic pentameter. Check it out, then try it yourself. You might find, at the very least, that you become more aware of the rhythm of your own lines, whether they employ regular meter or not.